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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the status of social welfare programs in the United States and recent efforts to reform such programs. It proposes key issues that need to be addressed in any attempt to overhaul the federal welfare system. Welfare reform should ensure that: (1) those families on public assistance are able to meet their basic needs in order to provide them the time and incentive to prepare for the job market; (2) the wages and benefits received from employment are adequate to support a family and provide for future growth; (3) there are real jobs that provide opportunities for security and adequate training resources as families make this transition; and (4) there is a system in place to provide "quality" child care to recipients not only while they are in training, but also long enough after training so that parents do not have to quit work in order to care for their children. The paper argues that Head Start can and should be an active partner in any effort to implement this system; the idea of "breaking the cycle of poverty" was the basis of the introduction of the Head Start program in 1965. (MDM)

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NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

Position Paper: Welfare Reform and Head Start

Adopted by the NHSA Board

April 11, 1994

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Acknowledgments

This paper builds upon a paper entitled, *"Two Essential Components For Welfare Reform,"* researched and prepared by Erica E. Tollett, Senior Public Policy Analyst for the National Black Child Development Institute, September 16, 1993. NHSA, with permission from NBCDI, has elaborated upon the paper to establish our position regarding welfare reform and all Head Start families.

Additionally, contributions from the Head Start community have been used to supplement both the information and the recommendations found throughout this paper. Key contributors include:

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A special thanks should also go to the thousands of Head Start parents, staff, and directors who have continued to keep us informed on this and other issues of importance to the low-income population served by our programs. Through active communication with their board representatives they have made our jobs easier and more meaningful.

Ronnie Herndon, President
National Head Start Association
May 1994

Executive Summary

The battle cry is a mixed one throughout the halls of Congress and in newsroom commentaries. "Break the cycle of poverty!" and "End welfare as we know it!" are popular rallying points for what has come to be known as Welfare Reform. At the National Head Start Association we take a more cautious view, and hopefully a more pragmatic one as well. Reform implies that something has been formed in order to be ***RE***-formed. When it comes to dealing with the less fortunate members of our society, we have never had a consistent system in place to be reformed.

In reviewing the proposed changes to the current methods used to dole out meager support to families with children in this country, NHSA proposes some key issues that must be addressed in any attempt to overhaul the system.

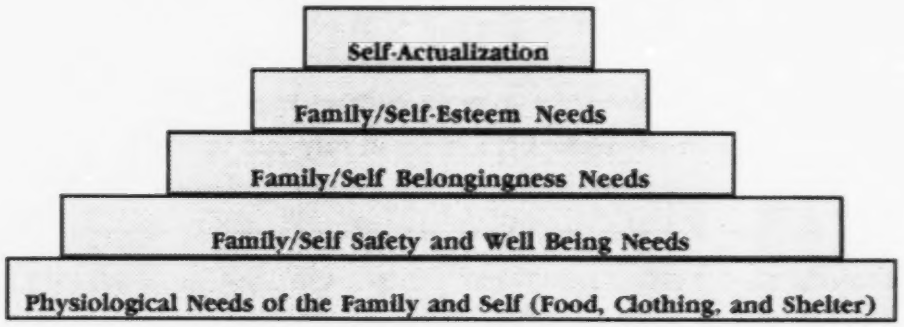
- Ensure that those families on public assistance are able to meet their basic needs in order to provide them the time and incentive to prepare for the job market.
- Ensure that the wages and benefits received from employment are adequate to support a family and provide for future growth.
- Ensure that there are "real" jobs that provide opportunities for security and adequate training resources as families make this transition.
- Ensure that there is a system in place to provide "quality" child care to recipients not only while they are in training, but continued long enough after training so that parents do not have to quit work in order to care for their children.

We also believe that Head Start can and should be an active partner in any effort to implement this system, since "breaking the cycle of poverty" was first used in the introduction of the Head Start program in 1965. The 1988 *Family Support Act* made vague reference to encouraging states to include Head Start in the development of their plans. It is our position that the language must be made stronger and that state plans **must** include input from Head Start, the one non-state entity that is most experienced in working with poor families.

President Clinton's pledge to "end welfare as we know it" will build upon the reform first introduced by Congressman Harold E. Ford (D-TN), in 1987. The intent of the final welfare reform bill, the *Family Support Act* of 1988, was to change the focus of welfare away from benefits or income support and emphasize employment, training, and education. While this intent is sound, the National Head Start Association (NHSA) believes that people need to feel secure enough to seek or train for meaningful work that will provide them with an adequate living wage, opportunities for job mobility, a sense of job satisfaction, and high quality child care.

It is a long tradition in both philosophy and psychology that the downtrodden members of any society cannot deal effectively with "self-improvement" issues if they are unable to meet their basic living needs. The longshoreman philosopher Eric Hoffer in ***"The True Believer"*** argues convincingly that, without initial reforms that improved the living conditions of the serfs, there may never have been a Russian Revolution. In psychology, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (shown below) has been shown to be an effective means of understanding how to deliver the appropriate intervention to families according to their situation[1].

Figure 1 - Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model


Self-Actualization
Family/Self-Esteem Needs
Family/Self Belongingness Needs
Family/Self Safety and Well Being Needs
Physiological Needs of the Family and Self (Food, Clothing, and Shelter)

(Adapted from Maslow, 1954)

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1. Powell, G., Rosen, B. and Clarke, C. (1993), "Season farm worker families: Head Start and special populations", Center for Education and Manpower Resources, Special Report, Ukiah, CA

Any attempt to *reform* the current welfare system must include measures that provide the continued livable supports[2] afforded by a comprehensive program of services, which is equitable across states, until the salary and benefits provided by employment can maintain the family at a level significantly above the poverty level. Once the primary wage-earner does enter the labor market, it is imperative that a system of benefits be continued in order to ease the transition from public support to self-support.

Some of these benefits would include the provision of health insurance coverage, receiving pay that was at least the higher of the federal, state or local minimum wage, and receiving an advanced payment of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). If these and other measures are taken, then our country will run less of a risk of creating a larger population of the working poor (below the 130 percent of poverty level). In 1987[3] it was estimated that there were more than 8 million children living in households where the parent (or parents) was employed either full or part time, but still earning less than the poverty level. Given the economic conditions that have prevailed since then, it is not unreasonable to expect much higher figures today.

In the past, welfare recipients have found it difficult to make the transition from public assistance to gainful employment. If they had more than $1,000 in savings, their AFDC payments would be docked. Also, getting a job entailed expenses that were a financial burden, such as new clothes, transportation, and child care costs. In addition, every dollar earned was a dollar less in their payment. Presently, a recipient may earn up to $1,322 a month and be eligible for payments. It is crucial for recipients to receive assistance for a time after they begin to work to become more financially secure.

The population most affected by welfare reform is children. Because low-income children compose the majority of welfare recipients, this form of aid is crucial for both life support and healthy development. Welfare reform has significant implications for children, families (primarily mother headed),

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2. The House Ways and Means Committee's 1993 "Green Book" shows that the average combined benefit (AFDC and Food Stamps) in 1992 was 70% of the poverty threshold for a single-parent with two children. This ranged from a high of 103% in Hawaii to a low of 44% in Mississippi.
3. Chilman, C. S. (1991), "Working poor families: Trends, causes, effects, and suggested policies." *Family Relations*, 40:191-198.

and child care. Issues to be considered in any attempt at welfare reform for children must include:

1. Children have a right to quality child care while their parents work or are in a training program designed to end welfare dependency. Quality child care is defined as care that meets the needs of the child and family while promoting child development, learning, and cultural sensitivity.
2. Family poverty places young children at risk, regardless of their birth order. Therefore, aid to families should not be limited by the number of children in the family.
3. Young children's development, especially their social and language development, is greatly affected by the quality and consistency of their child care experiences. Thus, child care provisions must ensure that settings meet standards of quality and that children are able to remain in the same setting over time, even after family income increases.

Additionally, there are important implications regarding the parents' need for child care. There must be recognition of the parents' right to provide child care for their children. This right should not be compromised for mothers on welfare. If mothers are required to work, they must be entitled to "quality" child care at a licensed facility. If these entitlements are not met, the mother should not be forced to work, and she should remain eligible to receive aid.

The president has suggested that two-year time limits should be placed on welfare. At least one of the rationales for time limits we certainly agree with; able-bodied people need to work. But we view a two-year limit on welfare benefits as a problematical policy prescription for at least two reasons: 1) It may be difficult to successfully help people move from welfare if quality jobs are not available; and 2) Compliance with time limits will be difficult if an infrastructure of quality early childhood education or child care is not in place.

Rather than an emphasis on time limits, NHSA believes that there are at least two other important components needed in a reformed welfare system: 1) We must target at-risk citizens, including low income families, teen parents, those in trouble with the law, and minority men for employment and training opportunities; and 2) We must ensure that children have quality child care/early childhood education.

ARE JOBS AVAILABLE FOR AMERICANS?

The Clinton administration should tie an economic stimulus plan to reforming the nation's welfare system. In April 1993, the White House and Senate Democratic leaders decided to discontinue their efforts to push for President Clinton's Economic Stimulus Package, or Jobs Bill, which would have provided funds to programs that assist America's children and their families. The package was unable to move to the Senate floor for a vote because of a Republican filibuster. The Stimulus Package was a modest $16.3 billion proposal with many provisions for children and their families. It would have provided supplemental funds for Head Start, WIC, summer youth employment, Chapter 1, and childhood immunizations. In addition, and just as critical to the well-being of children, there were funds to create 500,000 jobs.

Aggressive creation of quality jobs would go a long way in reforming welfare. High unemployment, underemployment, and low wages in many areas are the driving forces behind poverty, de-stabilized communities, and poor educational and health outcomes for children. Contrary to popular belief, most welfare recipients are not minorities. While people of color are disproportionately poor, the majority (three-fourths) of welfare recipients are Caucasian. Welfare reform must be culturally sensitive and meet the needs of minorities so they will not suffer disproportionately from unemployment and job losses.

Jobs alone will not be enough if the jobs people are provided do not pay a living wage. It is estimated that 35 percent of the Head Start family heads of households are employed full time. With the current poverty level (as defined for Head Start eligibility) at $12,320 per year for a family of three, these families are struggling to survive on less money than those receiving public assistance. In many cases, these families are also without health insurance or child care at the times needed.

Estimates regarding the value of AFDC combined with other subsidies (i.e., Food Stamps, WIC, Medicaid, child care subsidies, and housing assistance) range across the United States. However, the average given by the American Public Welfare Association is less than $20,000 for a family of three. In a recent

article on health care and tax breaks for Head Start employees, NHSA found that after all deductions (including health premiums), an employee making $20,000 per year could expect a take-home pay amount of less than $13,000. From that meager take-home, the employee would then need to pay for child care, full-price rent and food, and all of the other necessities of working and living. Yet, because their salary is $20,000 these families would not be eligible for Head Start.

In addition to jobs that pay a living wage, adults need job training to enhance their skills. Increasing the skills of young adults through education and training, particularly for those just starting families, can improve the quality of life for children. Yet, during 1986 to 1991, only 38 percent of young adults received training according to a National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.[4] Whites were more likely to receive company training while minority training was more likely to take place away from the workplace, such as in business schools, and vocational or technical institutes.[5]

Moreover, we must not leave men out of our discussions of welfare reform. Unemployed men are less likely to marry and form families than are employed men. Even if men do not marry, employed people add stability to communities, while unemployed people tend to contribute discord and disorganization to a community. Children are in a position to thrive when they see their parents and other adults working in jobs that contribute to healthy communities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY CHILD CARE

The language of the *Family Support Act*, as well as its legislative history, clearly indicates that child care is to be an entitlement to recipients in order to participate in the education, training, and employment opportunities offered as a part of the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Program (JOBS). Child care was recognized as an essential economic support for low-income families. Transitional child care was provided for a limited time for those individuals who

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[4] Veum, J. R., "Training among young adults: who, what kind, and for how long?" *Monthly Labor Review* (August 1993).
[5] Ibid

lost eligibility for AFDC. Also, parents were to contribute to the cost of the child care. The idea was to assist those parents who were moving out of welfare because "of increased hours of, or increased income from such employment." The conferees chose to place a sunset on that particular provision, effective September 30, 1998.

It is important that low-income families receive subsidized child care and their jobs must provide economic security so they can eventually pay for it themselves. If low income families do not receive subsidized child care, their expenses may very well be higher than their earnings, making employment a losing proposition.

The quality of the mother's (or primary caregiver's) interaction with her child during the first years of life, along with the child's environment, is critical to the healthy development of the young child. According to many developmental scientists, there are long-term implications regarding the quality of this attachment. The availability of top-rate child care promotes and strengthens the well-being of children and their families. When parents have this type of child care, they are more likely to secure jobs, pursue educational opportunities, or receive job training; all of these improve a parent's ability to provide for their children. Parents who are comfortable with their child care arrangements are better able to focus on their jobs or school obligations; this, in turn, helps build their confidence as parents and individuals. Quality child care helps ensure that preschool-age children have a strong foundation to prepare them for school and society. This has been emphasized once again with the recent release of both the Carnegie Report and the report of the Families and Work Institute[6].

Reform of the welfare system is an opportunity for this administration to move toward a national comprehensive child care program. Health services, developmentally appropriate educational practices, and parental involvement are valuable components Head Start has shown help prepare young children for school. Head Start's two-generational approach to child care/early childhood education works well for families. For example, the Head Start

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6. Each of these reports were released during the past month and each makes a plea for quality, licensed child care for infants that addresses the needs of children for secure attachments.

Expansion and Improvement Act of 1990, contained provisions to strengthen the quality of Head Start programs. As a result of these funds, many improvements were made, such as funds for Literacy programs.[7] We know that confident, informed, literate parents are more likely to speak often to their children, listen to them, and read aloud to them. Young children benefit from these basic developmental activities.

WELFARE REFORM AND HEAD START – FACTS AND OPPORTUNITIES:

When the Family Support Act passed in September 1988, Leon Panetta, current Director of Office of Management and Budget, was quoted as saying, "*The goals of true welfare reform are to preserve the family unit, provide adequate benefits, require expanded work and job training opportunities, and simplify and coordinate existing programs.*"

Not only does Head Start focus on all facets of welfare reform as referenced by Mr. Panetta, but Head Start is the only Federal Program that offers a conceptual framework for effective welfare reform. The promise of promoting family unity and providing quality comprehensive services to meet the needs of low-income families is fundamental to Head Start. There are a number of areas where Head Start and welfare reform are mutually supportive.

Fact: Head Start programs provide comprehensive training and technical assistance for staff and families that encompass all facets of self sufficiency and career development.

Opportunity: This training and technical assistance could be easily incorporated to include assistance for recipients of a welfare reform training program.

Fact: Head Start programs provide Child Development Associate (CDA) training for teachers, teacher assistants, and parents.

Opportunity: This Head Start training could also be extended to include additional participants within the system.

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[7] "Investing in Quality: The Impact of the Head Start Expansion and Improvement Act of 1990 in Its First Year of Implementation," a Report by the National Head Start Association, Alexandria, Va., June 1993.

Fact: The 1994 Head Start reauthorization currently includes competency-based credentials for all Head Start positions.

Opportunity: If successful in including this concept in the 1994 re-authorization, this competency-based credential would allow Head Start to become a more diverse work training environment for participants of a welfare reform system.

Fact: Head Start programs collaborate and interact with social service and other human service agencies.

Opportunity: This existing relationship allows recipients of the program to maximize use of the existing systems. This type of coordination should help eliminate fragmented services to families.

Fact: Head Start programs are currently providing services to JOBS participants.

Opportunity: Head Start offers a comprehensive approach to families. Further involvement in welfare reform enhances this comprehensive approach.

Fact: Head Start programs are located in the communities targeted by the *Family Support Act*, and subsequently, the communities most likely to be involved in the welfare reform movement.

Opportunity: Again, this type of focus supports optimal delivery of services and efficient use of funds.

Fact: Forty-nine percent of parents participating in the Head Start program are eligible for JOBS participation.

Opportunity: This presents an existing system to build upon.

Fact: Family needs assessments are required of all Head Start families.

Opportunity: This information could easily be utilized by a case worker thus avoiding the time duplicated on data collection and providing a more comprehensive coverage to a participating family in a welfare reform program.

Fact: The expansion of some Head Start programs to serve children full day, full year provides an opportunity for children of parents in a job training program to receive quality comprehensive services.

Opportunity: Allowing programs the flexibility to provide children full-day, full-year services, again, maximizes and centralizes services to children and families.

Fact: The 1992 Head Start Improvement Act included provisions that require Head Start programs to provide adult literacy to those families needing services.

Opportunity: Involving Head Start in welfare reform provides an opportunity to pull together Head Start and family literacy to better serve families in the welfare reform program.

The National Head Start Association believes that Congress must act to reverse the trends in poverty felt by all Americans. We concur with the National Black Child Development Institute that the following must be done:

1. We must ensure that those families receiving assistance are receiving adequate amounts to allow them to pursue training for quality jobs;
2. We must target young adults for employment and training opportunities to help young families just beginning to raise children;
3. We must develop policies that focus on men, particularly minority men, to help stabilize families; and
4. We must invest in quality child care/early childhood education, to ensure that employed parents are in a position to secure jobs, pursue educational opportunities, or receive job training.

"When parents are unable to assume their role, prevention is hampered. When parents cannot afford to provide their children with the housing, goods, and services needed to support them, parenting skills suffer."
Tollett, 1993

The National Head Start Association can and will do many things in response to the proposed welfare reforms. These actions will, in turn, help eliminate poverty. The following must be accomplished at the national, regional, state, and local levels[8]:

1. Educate and mobilize Head Start staff. This will include being advocates and spokespeople for Head Start families, calling attention to inadequacies of existing services, or the need for additional services, and providing parents of the program with skills they need to become their own advocates.
2. Educate parents about welfare.
3. Network in the community. This includes linking welfare recipients with advocacy organizations.
4. Approach decision makers, and
5. Access the media.

It is the position of the National Head Start Association that no child, regardless of race, should grow up poor in this, the richest nation on earth. We believe that the best strategy for improving the lives of children is one of prevention. Parents should be the first line of defense in a prevention strategy. Parents are the nurturers, the protectors, the teachers, and the socializers for children.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, welfare carries a stigma. Social security, Medicare, veteran's benefits, college loans -- also government benefits that help people -- do not carry the same stigmatizing baggage as welfare. Jule Sugarman, one of the founders of Head Start, said, "Being on welfare is a miserable existence; most people want to get off it as soon as possible!" But, welfare is the most crucial early child support system in the nation. The goal of true welfare reform must be the elimination of poverty, not a system that increases the nation's working poor. This is why continued support should be offered to low-income families until their salary and benefits provided by employment keep them above the poverty level and maintain a living wage.

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8. Adapted from: Bancroft, J., (1994), "Where does Head Start stand with welfare reform?", manuscript submitted for publication, NHSA Journal, Alexandria, Va.

Government has developed programs and policies that are viewed positively and foster family functioning. For example, Stephanie Coontz, author of *The Way We Never Were*, has noted that many families depended heavily on assistance from the government during the 1950s and that "Federal GI benefits, available to 40 percent of the male population between the ages of 20 and 24, were one of the main reasons that a whole generation of men could expand their education and improve their job prospects without foregoing marriage and childbearing."[9]

Policy makers and others attempting to change or correct the welfare system must begin to view welfare in terms of how to increase the number of stable families who can take care of their children. Policy makers must agree that improving the lives of children is to be considered within the context of the family and that government's role is to facilitate the support of families through policies that support their optimum functioning. Shifting the public's view about welfare may even require new terminology. We could change the nature of welfare discussions by referring to reforming our "Family Support System."

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[9] Hearing before the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, House of Representatives, Investing in Families: A *Historical Perspective*, 102nd sess., 23 July 1992, 25-26.